

Phone Calls from the Front

General Farrendel Laesornysh held the telephone's black, cone-shaped ear piece to one of his pointed, elven ears as he leaned forward to speak into the receiver. The telephone perched in the center of the small wooden desk set in one corner of the small office set aside for the use of the elven king.

Farrendel winced at the shouting from somewhere outside of the office door, and he pressed a finger into the ear not pressed to the ear piece to block out some of the general hubbub of this place. He preferred to avoid the command building, if possible, given that it was such a hive of activity that it would put wasps to shame. But all the secured, direct telephone lines ran to the headquarters building.

There were, of course, telephone lines running to the communications building where a whole bank of telephones were provided for use. But those telephone lines ran through a network of telephone hubs and operators, and there was always the chance a Mongavarian spy could be planted somewhere in the network. One couldn't speak freely on those lines.

"It is just as well that we hadn't planned to stay longer." Rharreth's voice boomed with laughter despite the distance of the line stretching from Fort Defense to the troll capital of Osmana. "Rhohen and Fieran got along as well—or as badly—as ever."

Farrendel sighed and shook his head, the metal of the ear piece warming against his ear. "What happened?"

"A morning practice that turned more than mere practice." Rharreth still sounded more amused than angry. "Rhohen didn't take losing with any measure of grace."

“I am sure my son was not as innocent in the encounter as he thought he was.” Farrendel stopped plugging his ear long enough to rub at his temple. When it came to his cousin Rhohen, Fieran could be quite the instigator.

“No, he wasn’t. But neither was mine.” The amusement left Rharreth’s tone, replaced with something filled with the weight of memories and regrets. “Given our family history, I suppose this childish antagonism is better than the alternative.”

Farrendel’s sleeves had fallen away from his wrists, revealing the white scars still marring his skin there. Permanent reminders of the torture he’d endured at the hands of Rharreth’s father and brother.

“Yes.” Another sigh gusted from Farrendel, though it likely wouldn’t carry over the telephone lines to Rharreth in far-off Kostaria. “Our sons are not yet hardened the way we were at their age.”

A lifetime ago, or so it felt. Even though by elven years, it was not so long, nor was Farrendel old enough, if he had been a human, to have a son as old as Fieran.

“No, but I fear they will find that same hardness, before this war ends.” Rharreth, too, sounded old even across the miles. Yet he waited a beat, as if letting the silence dissipate the shadow of the past, before he spoke again. “I heard Fieran gave a good account of himself at the Battle over Bridgetown. He had more of the edge of the warrior about him than he had the last time I saw him.”

“That he does.” Farrendel did not try to hold back the pride from his voice.

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“What have you been up to today, sason?” Farrendel kept his voice as low as he dared. Too low and it wouldn’t carry over the telephone line. Too loud, and he would disturb Weylind,

who hunched at his desk a few feet away, glowering quite darkly at the reams of paperwork spread before him.

At least Weylind let Farrendel use this direct line. They were not supposed to use this line for personal calls but no one would argue if the General Laesornysh made a few personal calls. After all, even the location of Farrendel's family at any given point was a military secret. He, Essie, and the children could barely say a thing if they spoke on the public lines for fear a Mongavarian spy might be listening in.

"I colored another picture for you." Tryndar's voice rang high-pitched and slightly distorted through the long telephone line that stretched between Fort Defense and Treehaven, with a single operator at Winstead Palace in Aldon.

"Linshi, sason. I will hang it on my wall with the others." Farrendel could not help but smile at the thought of the wall in his wooden shelter. Seven of Tryndar's pictures already hung on the wood, and Farrendel would keep plastering them there as long as Tryndar kept sending them. Perhaps by the time the war ended, his whole shelter would be papered.

His smile faded as an ache filled his chest. He'd been in Tryndar's place years and years ago. The youngest son, still a mere child with his siblings all grown up. Watching as his father and brother went off to war. Experiencing a childhood defined by war.

Tryndar, at least, still had a mother, someone Farrendel hadn't had when he was Tryndar's age and watching his dacha and Weylind go off to war. Not to mention, Elliana and Louise remained at home as well.

"My turn." Ellie's voice rang faintly in the background before coming through more clearly. "I got a new book, but I read it all already. Aunt Jalissa says she will bring me a new book from Estyra when she comes back from her next visit there. But it is going to be so long."

Now the smile was back. Farrendel could only shake his head. He and Essie had seen to it that their children could speak, read, and write both Escarlish and elvish. He had just never considered that such a skill would be necessary to keep his daughter supplied with books. It seemed she read books faster than the Escarlish and elven authors could publish them.

“I suppose you will have to read your favorite books again while you wait.” Farrendel closed his eyes, picturing the overflowing bookshelves filling Ellie’s rooms at both Treehaven and Ellonahshinel.

“I suppose.” Ellie heaved a sigh so loud Farrendel could hear it as a burst of static through the line. “Mama says they might start restricting paper usage for the war effort and there might not be as many books published. I hope they don’t cancel the next Star Forest book because I really want that one.”

“I highly doubt they will cancel that one.” Farrendel suppressed his grimace, even though his daughter was not there to see it. The Star Forest novels were not the most dubious when it came to literary value or content nor were they deleterious to his daughter’s morals. But their portrayal of elves...and blatant rip-off of his and Essie’s romance did not endear them to him.

Yet he could not deny the popularity of the novels and subsequent moving pictures. Thanks to them, tourism to Tarenhiel and Kostaria had increased exponentially, and Calafaren had become so popular the city had expanded greatly over the past few decades.

There was no way the next Star Forest novel would be canceled, nor the production of the next moving picture. They would be considered too vital to elf-human relations and likely deemed necessities for the war effort.

Across the small office, Weylind was quietly grouching to himself over whatever report he was currently perusing.

“Ellie, Tryndar, you may each get a cookie.” Essie spoke in the background, then there was a crackle. Perhaps Ellie had dropped the ear piece in her scramble for cookies.

Moments later, Essie’s voice came, cheery and warm, over the telephone line, easing something inside Farrendel’s chest that he had not realized was wound tight. “We’ll have a few minutes before the children return. How are you?”

“You know. Probably better than I do.” Farrendel leaned his elbows on the small table beneath the telephone, lowering his voice still further.

Thanks to the elishina—heart bond—that he shared with Essie, there was very little of his emotional state that she did not sense.

Over the years, they had gotten better at subconsciously giving each other space in the elishina. It was possible to tune it out, which was not quite the same thing as fully blocking it.

But since Farrendel had left Essie to head for the front, he found himself clinging to the full awareness of the elishina more than he had for the past few decades.

Then again, they had not needed the elishina in the past few decades as they did now. They had not been separated by war like this since that first year of their marriage.

In the first few months after their marriage, he had left frequently for weeks at a time to fight the trolls. But back then, he and Essie had been young and still working toward falling in love. They had not even had an elishina yet.

Then they had been torn apart by his capture. They had an elishina by then, and that had sustained him during those two awful weeks of torture.

But in the end, they had been separated for a mere two weeks. Now? They would be separated for the duration of this war. It would be months before he saw her again. Hopefully not years.

Some of his thoughts must have carried through the elishina for Essie's voice softened. "I know. But I would still like to hear it."

"It has not been so terrible yet." Farrendel shook his head. "I have been thankful Weylind bestowed the rank of general on me years ago. It has been quite convenient that I outrank everyone and answer to no one besides Weylind. I am not assigned to any specific unit so I have very little paperwork."

"You are always welcome to assist with mine," Weylind grumbled down at his work.

"And you, shashon, assured me you would not eavesdrop." Farrendel raised his eyebrows.

"You spoke my name and caught my attention." Weylind lifted his head enough to glare, a pucker digging deeper grooves in his forehead.

"Is that Weylind? Tell him to stop being grumpy." Essie's laugh carried through the line.

"How did you know he is grumpy?" Farrendel could not help his trace of a chuckle as he kept his gaze on Weylind.

"Of course he is grumpy. He is always grumpy." Essie laughed again, the sound a warm balm to his heart.

Farrendel leaned a few inches away from the mouth piece. "Essie says to tell you to stop being grumpy."

Weylind huffed and made an indecipherable grumbling noise before he spoke. "Of course I am grumpy when whoever prepared this paperwork seems to have taken leave of their senses."

Farrendel leaned closer to the telephone receiver to speak to Essie again. "It seems his paperwork is quite aggravating."

On the other end of the telephone line, Essie laughed. Weylind made that huffy grumbling noise again.

A shriek rang in the background of Essie's laugh, followed by a chorus of "Mama! Mama! Mama!"

Essie sighed, a fond frustration filling the elishina between them. "I need to go. I love you."

"I love you too, Shynafir." He used the elven title for her, the one she had earned long ago during the last wars they had endured together.

That brought a trace of the laugh to her voice and in the elishina. "These children will find out just how fierce I can be if they keep testing my last nerve. We'll talk soon."

The line clicked, and Farrendel sat there for another moment, the line dead, before he could bring himself to hang up the ear piece.

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"It's just...just...so frustrating, Dacha!" Adry's voice rang fierce and loud through the telephone line. "Most of my unit fumbles around like they have never even held a sword before! Elves with any prior experience or training from their dachas were all assigned to posts along the borders or training at an outpost near the border. They aren't in the Reserves here at Estyra."

Farrendel remained quiet to let his daughter talk out her frustration. He had lots of practice with such things, raising children who took after their mother and were far more talkative than he was.

"Then there's me. Everything is so *easy*! Well, the fifteen-mile runs in full kit are mildly challenging, but everything else is just...not. Even those training us can't push me the way you

did. I'm just *bored*. And everyone else is struggling so much just to even block a basic sword strike. It's ridiculous."

"Some elves have not trained with a sword since they were big enough to hold a wooden practice stave." Farrendel worked to keep his tone mild, wiping away all traces of his internal laughter. He didn't want Adry to feel like he was laughing at her troubles.

"I get that. And I sympathize, really. But I'm better than this unit. I shouldn't be here." Adry all but growled the words. "I should be at the border. I should be fighting. You know I could."

That wiped away his urge to laugh.

"I know you could, sena." Farrendel leaned closer to the telephone, his heart aching. "But do not be in such a hurry toward war. Once you fight—once you kill—you will never be able to go back to the way you were before."

"I know that, Dacha. But you and Fieran are already fighting, and you know that I will have to, eventually." Adry's tone rang with a ferocity that was almost anger. "I might as well join the fight sooner rather than later. There is no sense putting it off."

Perhaps not to her, but Farrendel would much rather his daughter cling to her ignorance of war for as long as possible.

Of all his children, she had the strongest fighting spirit, and because of that, he worried for her the most. Would war refine her or destroy her?

Adry didn't wait for his response. She kept right on talking. "I can't *stand* just being here doing nothing. The eastern forests are burning, Dacha! I could stop it!"

She could. A few weeks after his training with Fieran at Fort Charibert, Farrendel had taken both Adry and Louise to the bomb range to train them how to deflect bombs and large gun

shells. Although, he had not gone the extra step on teaching to kill that he had with Fieran. He had not been able to bring himself to push his daughters that way.

He should have, for now both Adry and Louise were facing war without the preparation he had given Fieran.

When Farrendel shifted on the chair stationed before the telephone desk, his new gas mask knocked against a desk leg. A reminder of the reality of this all new, modern age of warfare where gas attacks and fire bombs were the norm. All the preparation in the world would not have been enough for this war.

“I understand, sena.” Farrendel hunched under the weight. He had once been that eager young elf, chafing when he was left behind to guard the camp while his father and brother fought the trolls, knowing he could change the direction of the war if he was just given a chance.

Then he was captured, tortured, and his father killed in his rescue, stripping him of all his ignorance and eagerness for war.

But Adry would not wish to hear it, nor would she listen.

Instead, he approached the conversation from a different direction. “Escarland has Fieran, Louise, and your mother with use of my magic. But Tarenhiel only has you and me to lend our magic to defense. I am needed here. So that leaves only you to guard Estyra.”

Adry made a noise, as if she wanted to protest, but she did not interrupt.

“All elves are grieving the destruction of the eastern forests.” Farrendel glanced toward Weylind’s empty desk. After the first bombing, Weylind had gone to Tarenhiel’s eastern sea border to reinforce his son Ryfon and the warriors defending the coast. “It is a great loss. But if Mongavaria should bomb Estyra, the loss of Ellonahshinel and all the records and treasures of the thousands of years of our people’s history would be a far greater loss. It would be the

destruction of the heart and soul of our people. Right now, your uncle Weylind has deemed the loss of the eastern forests a price he is willing to pay to ensure that Estyra remains safe.”

Adry heaved a sigh, remaining silent for a long moment before she muttered in a resigned tone, “I still don’t like it.”

“I know, sena.” He did not like it either. But that was war. There was very little of it to like. It was something to be endured and waged to defend his people from those who would seek their hurt.

“It isn’t like Estyra is in any real danger.” Adry’s voice turned almost petulant. “Aunt Rheva has ordered the city to go dark at night, and the forest watchers have closed the trees up tight. The Mongavarian airships will never be able to find Estyra to bomb it.”

“Perhaps not, but it is a risk no one is willing to take just yet.” Farrendel rested a hand on his sword’s hilt. “There may come a time when you are needed more at the front than you are at Estyra, but that time is not yet.”

“I suppose.” Adry heaved another sigh. “I just wish training wasn’t so boring.”

That was a concern. Training could be boring, yes, but it should also push one’s limits and leave one invigorated instead of frustrated as Adry was.

“I will speak to the commanders of the Reserves and see to it that you are assigned a more experienced warrior for your training.” At the breath Adry sucked in, he added, “I will do it discreetly, sena. Do not fret.”

He would have to ponder exactly how to do that. He did not wish to cause Adry’s commanders or fellow warriors to resent her since her famous dacha went above her commanders’ heads to request special treatment for her—if harder training was something to be envied. But if Adry was to be stationed at Estyra, she should be afforded a level of training

commensurate with her skills rather than allowing her skills to atrophy. Once she was called upon to go to war, she would need to be sharp.

The wailing of the sirens blared over the fort, penetratingly loud even inside the office.

Farrendel winced and sighed. "I need to go."

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"They found them." Julien's voice rang weary but tinged with relief even over the long distance of the telephone line.

Farrendel slumped against the telephone desk, breathing out his own relief. His nephews Rokyd and Lucien had been found. He searched for the words to respond. "Are they all right?"

"Yes." Julien paused for a moment. "They sustained some burns and will need time to recover. But they will be all right."

"Good." The single word seemed too small for the weight lifting from his chest. Through the reports coming from Dar Goranth, Farrendel had learned Rokyd and Lucien's ship had exploded, all the crew listed as missing in action. But this was the first time he had a chance to talk to Julien.

At least he knew Fieran and Merrik were both all right. The reports about the battle had been filled with rather head-shaking stories.

"Fieran was the one to find them." Julien's tone lightened. Perhaps he needed the change in topic after the weight of the near grief he had suffered. "I suppose you heard about Fieran's heroics during the battle?"

"Yes." Farrendel gave in to the urge to pinch his brow. "Did he really fly his aeroplane inverted?"

“I wasn’t there to witness it, but I’ve heard the story from enough trustworthy sources to confirm that, yes, he did.” Julien’s laugh, still rough with his weariness, came through the telephone line. “Though I’m not sure I believe it. I didn’t think aeroplanes could fly upside down.”

“There have been a few experiments, but it is generally considered inadvisable.” Farrendel pinched his brow harder. He was not sure if he wanted to shake his head in resignation or burst with pride.

“I’d think it would also be inadvisable to fly with another aeroplane dangling by vines beneath your craft, but that’s what Merrik did.” Julien paused, and when he spoke again, the laugh had disappeared from his voice. “Their troll commanding officer here submitted both Fieran and Merrik for medals, and I’ve given my stamp of approval to fast-track them as much as possible.”

Farrendel was not sure what to say to that, the pride for his son choking his words in his throat. Finally, he managed, “Linshi.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s Fieran and Merrik who did all the heroics.” Julien paused, then he spoke almost hesitantly. “Did you hear who they saved? He is an elf lieutenant and the nephew of some elf lord named Hatharal. Melantha said you’d recognize the name.”

Farrendel stiffened at the name. Of course he knew the family. He had been just a babe when Hatharal broke off his engagement to Melantha, but the whole family had made their feelings about Farrendel’s existence—and his illegitimate birth—quite clear over the years.

Thankfully, that had resulted in them mostly ignoring Farrendel, Essie, and his children over the years, as if they thought withholding their presence was a punishment. But they had been quite free with their remarks to Weylind and Rheva.

Would this cause the family to soften toward Farrendel? Or would they remain just as stuffy about something that happened a hundred and seventy-five years ago?

“Yes.” Farrendel sighed into the receiver. “Elven politics might get more complicated.”

“Have I ever mentioned how glad I am that I married into troll politics instead of elven ones?” Julien laughed. “Elves are all perfect faces hiding their manipulations. Trolls solve their problems with a punch and a Dulraith or two. Bloody, violent, and simple. I can handle that.”

The elves would call that uncivilized. But was it truly more civilized to kill with words and backstabbing manipulations instead?

“Instead, we both have to deal with army politics.” Farrendel grimaced at the telephone, glancing around to ensure that the door to Weylind’s office was still closed. A mere month at the front, and he was already sick of the politics. The generals of all the various branches and kingdoms gathered here at the front spent just as much time squawking like a bunch of hens determining a pecking order as they did actually fighting the Mongavarians.

“Too true.” Julien heaved an exaggerated sigh. He paused for a long moment before he spoke again. “Speaking of politics, I’m not sure this story would have made it back to you yet, since it wasn’t officially written up. Did you hear about Fieran and the penguin surfing down the stairs?”

“The what?” Farrendel went back to pinching his brow. “What did my son do now?”